PULSE WATCH · SOUTHLAND

Fourteen million on contractors — no regional comparison of protect versus retreat

Environment Southland LGOIMA response (fA80199, 28 August 2026) discloses $14.73 million in external consultant and contractor spend on flood protection, river management, coastal hazards and climate adaptation from 2022–2026 YTD, while confirming it holds no regional cost–benefit analysis of hard infrastructure versus managed retreat, and no modelling of ratepayer, property-value or revenue impacts from large-scale acquisition or retreat.

1. Executive summary

• **Spend disclosed:** $14,729,066.17 in contractor/consultant actuals identified by Environment Southland as falling within flood protection, river management, coastal hazard assessment and climate-adaptation work. Years labelled 2022–2026; 2026 is year-to-date at the date of the reply.

• **Concentration:** Two lines dominate — Catchment Projects ($3.88m, almost all in 2023) and Co-Funded Projects ($3.11m, accelerating sharply in 2025–26). LIDAR acquisition ($1.58m) and Administration ($1.47m, rising every year to $614k in 2026) follow.

• **The gap the requester asked about:** After searching "a large volume of technical documentation", the Council states it does **not** hold regional-level analysis comparing costs, benefits, risks or long-term outcomes of stopbanks, drainage upgrades, channel works or pumping systems versus managed retreat, property acquisition or voluntary buyouts. It also holds no modelling of long-term impacts of large-scale retreat/acquisition on ratepayers, property values or Council revenue. Those parts of the request are refused under LGOIMA s 17(e) (information does not exist / is not held).

• **So what:** Public money is being spent at scale on data, modelling, events, science strategy and co-funded physical works. The fundamental fiscal choice — keep raising and maintaining flood assets versus planned withdrawal from the highest-risk land — remains unquantified at regional scale. Infrastructure strategy documents already flag managed retreat as a possible response to sea-level rise in some locations; the analytical work that would let ratepayers and elected members compare those paths has not been produced.

• **Immediate implication:** The 2027–2037 Long-term Plan cycle and the first three-year Murihiku Climate Action Plans are the next decision windows. Without a published protect-versus-retreat CBA and ratepayer-impact model, those plans will default to more of the current mix: co-funded stopbank upgrades plus growing consultant overhead.

Official position, 28 August 2026. "Environment Southland does not have analysis comparing the costs, benefits, risks, or long-term outcomes of major flood protection infrastructure options against managed retreat, property acquisition, or voluntary buyout pathways, at a regional level." It "does not hold any specific modelling assessing the long-term impacts of large-scale property acquisition or managed retreat on regional property values, Council revenue, or ratepayer impacts." — Lucy Hicks, GM Integrated Catchment Management.

2. Context and the request

Jared White asked Environment Southland, under the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act 1982, for three things covering 1 July 2020 to the present: (1) total external consultant/contractor spend on flood protection, river management, coastal hazard assessment, managed retreat, property acquisition or climate-adaptation planning, broken down by year and major project; (2) any reports since 2020 comparing hard-protection options with managed retreat or buyouts; and (3) any modelling of long-term ratepayer, property-value or Council-revenue effects of large-scale acquisition or retreat.

A first letter was sent on 30 July 2026. The 28 August reply supplies the financial breakdown and refuses parts 2 and 3 on the basis that the documents do not exist. The Council notes it found a large volume of project-specific technical assessments, monitoring reports and engineering advice — some already on es.govt.nz — and invites a further request if those files are wanted.

This sits inside a wider regional programme. Environment Southland manages more than 500 km of stopbanks plus pumps, gates and drainage, with flood-resilience assets previously described in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Since 2020 it has run multi-phase co-investment with Kanoa / the Regional Infrastructure Fund (RIF): completed works in Gore, Mataura, Wyndham and Invercargill; Aparima / Otautau upgrades; Te Anau Basin and Oreti works; and an $18 million Mataura River package

(Gore–Mataura) announced in 2025–26 with a $10.8 million RIF loan and $7.2 million Council contribution. Parallel work includes catchment-scale 2D hydraulic models, bathymetric LiDAR, a Murihiku "Slow the Flow" nature-based pilot (MfE-funded), a Regional Climate Change Strategy (adopted 2024) and a Regional Framework for Action on Climate (adopted 2025). The 2024–54 Infrastructure Strategy already records that predicted sea-level rise may require "new sea walls, or in some areas plan for managed retreat." The analytical step that would price those alternatives against continued protection has not been done at regional level.

3. What the money shows

3.1 Yearly totals

In-scope contractor actuals total $14.73 million across the five labelled years. 2023 is the outlier ($4.56m) because Catchment Projects booked $3.80 million that year. 2026 year-to-date is already $4.20 million, driven by Co-Funded Projects ($2.42m) and Administration ($0.61m). If 2026 continues at the same run-rate, the calendar/financial year will exceed the 2023 peak.

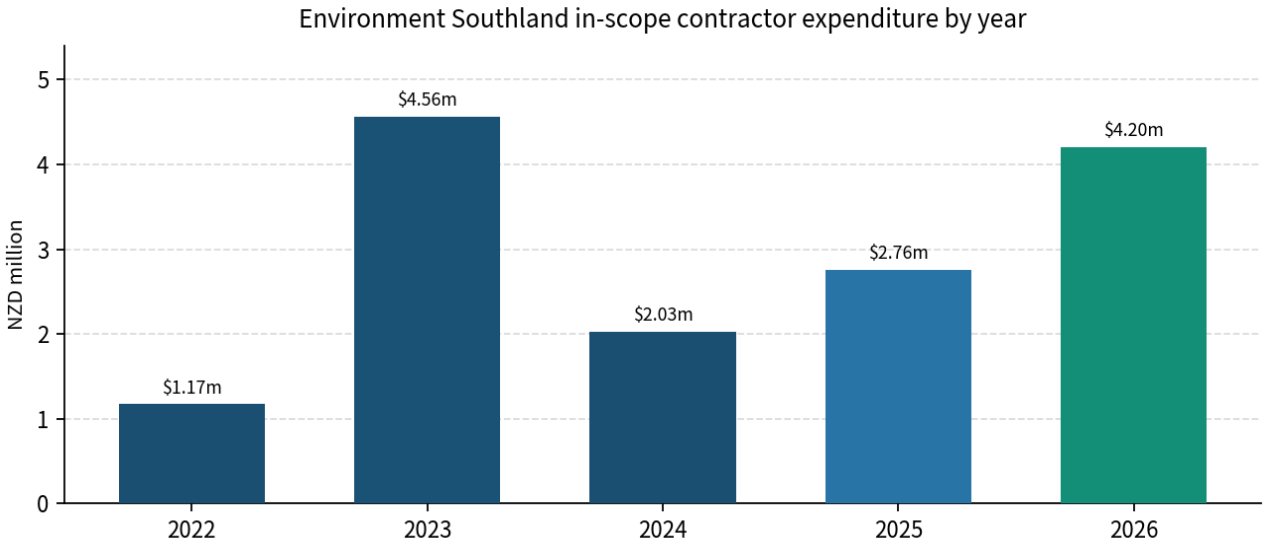

Figure 1. In-scope contractor expenditure by labelled year ($ million). 2026 is year-to-date at 28 August.

Year	Contractor actuals (NZD)	Share of grand total	Notable driver
2022	1,173,937.94	8.0%	LIDAR $795k; Monitoring $122k
2023	4,562,196.58	31.0%	Catchment Projects $3.80m
2024	2,029,297.94	13.8%	Admin jumps to $373k; Emergencies $384k
2025	2,759,831.94	18.7%	Co-Funded $695k; Events $681k; Climate science $291k
2026 YTD	4,203,801.77	28.5%	Co-Funded $2.42m; Admin $614k; Events $294k
Grand total	**14,729,066.17**	**100%**	

Table 1. Yearly contractor actuals as supplied. Percentages calculated from the stated grand total.

3.2 Category pattern

Forty-plus activity lines were coded. Ten categories account for roughly $13.1 million (89%) of the disclosed total. Physical-works and catchment delivery sit alongside a large and growing "soft" layer: administration, events, science strategy & social science, climate-adaptation science, hazard advice, and water-management tools.

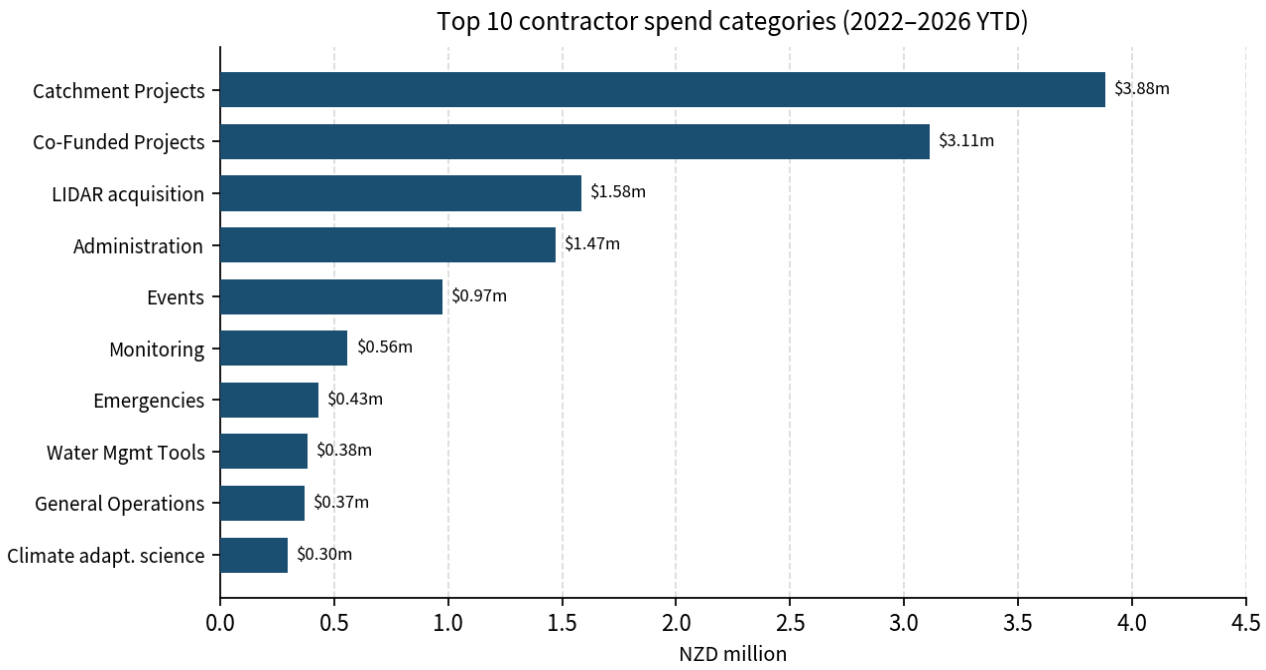

Figure 2. Ten largest disclosed contractor categories, 2022–2026 YTD.

Catchment Projects ($3.88m) is almost a single-year event in 2023. Without a line-item description in the LGOIMA table it is not possible to say how much was design versus construction versus land or consenting work. It is the single largest disclosed line.

Co-Funded Projects ($3.11m) is the growth engine of 2025–26 and aligns with publicly announced RIF / Kanoa packages (Aparima, Oreti, Te Anau, Mataura/Gore). The contractor figure is only Environment Southland's external spend coded to this heading; it is not the full capital cost of the schemes (the Mataura package alone is described publicly as $18 million total).

LIDAR acquisition ($1.58m, 2022–24) is consistent with the Provincial Growth Fund / LINZ Southland LiDAR programme and subsequent bathymetric surveys of the Oreti, Aparima and New River Estuary. Official commentary states the data is used to check stopbank heights, derive hydrologically enforced DEMs, and support flood-inundation models. That is necessary input for any future protect-versus-retreat comparison — but it is input, not the comparison itself.

Administration ($1.47m) has grown from $19k (2022) to $614k (2026 YTD). In four years the admin line has become larger than most science programmes. Combined with Events ($975k in 2025–26 only), Science Strategy & Social Science ($196k), Science Integration & Reporting ($46k in 2026) and Climate adaptation science and modelling ($297k), the "process and engagement" layer is now a material share of the disclosed contractor budget.

Lines that look closer to the requester's subject-matter remain small: Climate & Hazard Adaption $106k (2026 only), Hazard Advice & Information $74k, River Works $18k, Regional Works $197k, Resilience $58k, AF8 EQC Projects $68k. There is no category labelled "managed retreat", "property acquisition" or "buyout". Either that work is not being contracted, or it is buried inside Administration, Co-Funded, Climate science or Catchment Projects without being identified.

4. What the Council says it does not have

The refusal under section 17(e) is specific. Environment Southland searched multiple business units. It found project-level engineering, monitoring and advice. It did not find:

- A regional comparison of costs, benefits, risks or long-term outcomes of major flood-protection infrastructure (stopbanks, drainage upgrades, channel works, pumping systems) versus managed retreat, property acquisition or voluntary buyout pathways.
- Modelling of the long-term effects of large-scale property acquisition or managed retreat on regional property values, Council revenue, or ratepayers.

That is a different statement from "we have not decided yet." It is a statement that the decision-support product does not exist at the scale the question was asked. Individual scheme business cases submitted to the Regional Infrastructure Fund will contain project-level benefit claims (the public Mataura material cites 7,000 residents, 1,500 ha of land and $803 million of assets protected). Those are not a regional protect-versus-retreat ledger, and they do not model the fiscal consequences of buying

property instead of raising banks.

The 2024–54 Infrastructure Strategy already contemplates the fork in the road. On sea-level rise it lists “increased need for new sea walls, or in some areas plan for managed retreat.” On floodplains it talks about transitioning, over the medium and longer term, to “alternative ways of managing floodplains.” Capability-building in the first three years of the strategy was explicitly framed as the prerequisite for evaluating options. Two years on from LTP adoption, the LGOIMA answer is that the evaluation still has not been written down as a regional analysis.

5. Analysis and implications

5.1 Spending is ahead of the choice

The disclosed contractor series shows a region that is paying for the ingredients of adaptive planning — LiDAR, 2D models, climate-impact science (Earth Sciences NZ / NIWA lineage work), nature-based pilots, engagement events — and simultaneously paying for more of the traditional product (co-funded stopbank and channel upgrades). What it is not paying for, on this evidence, is the document that would tell elected members and ratepayers when the traditional product stops being the cheaper or fairer option.

That sequencing has a lock-in effect. Each new co-funded scheme extends the life and book value of flood assets that later retreat decisions would strand. Each year of rising Administration and Events spend builds an organisational habit of process around the current pathway. By the time a regional CBA appears, if it appears in the 2027–37 LTP, a further $10 million-plus of contractor activity and a larger stock of upgraded banks will already be in place.

5.2 Ratepayer exposure is unmodelled

Environment Southland has already shifted river-management rating toward a regional capital-value rate on the argument that “everyone benefits.” Flood-protection operating expenditure was a live LTP 2024 issue (an extra $2.3 million a year was proposed, then scaled back and partly reserve-funded after submissions). Central government co-investment currently socialises a large share of capital cost. None of that substitutes for a model of what happens to the rating base, to private property values, and to Council revenue if a coastal or floodplain community is instead acquired or retreated from. The Council has now said, on the record, that it does not hold that model.

National climate-adaptation policy is itself unfinished. Environment Southland has been watching the Finance and Expenditure Committee inquiry into community-led retreat and adaptation funding. Until a national framework allocates residual risk and cost-sharing, regional councils that keep building without a local protect-versus-retreat ledger are taking a fiscal position by default: protect now, allocate losses later.

5.3 Transparency limits

The supplied table is a pivot of “Total Actuals” by coded category and year. It does not name firms, contract titles, deliverables or whether amounts are design, construction supervision, community engagement or legal. “Events” at $975k and “Administration” at $1.47m are large enough that a follow-up request for the underlying general-ledger lines is justified. “Catchment Projects” at $3.88m in a single year likewise needs a project list before anyone can judge value.

The Council’s offer to supply the underlying technical documentation is useful. Those files will describe how water moves and how particular banks perform. They will not, on the Council’s own account, answer the comparison the requester asked for.

6. Recommendations

1. **Follow-up LGOIMA on the ledger, not the narrative.** Request: (a) the general-ledger extract behind Administration, Events, Catchment Projects and Co-Funded Projects (vendor, description, amount, date); (b) any business cases or funding agreements supplied to Kanoa / RIF / MBIE for the 2024–26 co-investment tranches; (c) any internal papers that use the words “managed retreat”, “buyout”, “property acquisition” or “voluntary relocation” even if they are not a full regional CBA.

2. **Accept the offer of technical documents — then map them.** Take the project-level assessments the Council is willing to release and produce a simple inventory: which catchments have current 2D models, which stopbank reaches have residual-risk numbers, which coastal cells have sea-level-rise inundation under the latest Earth Sciences NZ / NZSeaRise scenarios. That inventory is the minimum needed to see where a protect-versus-retreat CBA could actually be run.

3. **Ask the territorial authorities the same three questions.** Invercargill City, Southland District and Gore District sit on the rating base and the district-plan levers. A regional council with no regional model does not preclude a district having parcel-scale work. Identical LGOIMAs will show whether the gap is truly region-wide.

4. **Watch the 2027–37 LTP and the first Murihiku Climate Action Plans.** The Regional Framework for Action on Climate (adopted 2025) schedules three-year action plans alongside the next long-term plan. That is the formal place a protect-versus-retreat analysis would appear if it is going to appear. Absence in the draft consultation documents would confirm the current path is being extended without the comparison.

5. **Separate "capability" spend from "choice" spend in public reporting.** LiDAR, models and climate-impact science are decision inputs. Stopbank construction is a decision. Administration and events are overhead. Future official information and annual-report tables should not collapse those three into a single "climate adaptation" bucket.

6. **Ombudsman review is available but may not be the highest-yield next step.** Section 17(e) refusals are hard to overturn if the documents genuinely do not exist. The higher-yield path is to force the creation of the missing analysis through the LTP process and through targeted follow-up requests for the contracts and business cases that do exist.

7. Sources and method

Primary source: Environment Southland letter to Jared White, 28 August 2026, ref. fA80199, and enclosed table "Sum of Total Actuals Contractor Expenditure — Yearly total sums." Figures in this report are taken from that table without adjustment. Year labels and category names are the Council's. 2026 is treated as year-to-date because the letter is dated 28 August 2026. The original official-information request sought coverage from 1 July 2020; the supplied table begins at 2022.

Supporting public sources used for context (not for the expenditure totals):

- Environment Southland Flood Resilience Programme pages and RIF / Kanoa tranche business-case listings on es.govt.nz.
- Long-term Plan 2024–2034 consultation document and 2024–54 Infrastructure Strategy (managed-retreat and "alternative ways of managing floodplains" language).
- Regional Climate Change Strategy (adopted Oct 2024) and Regional Framework for Action on Climate (adopted mid-2025).
- Public announcements of the $18 million Mataura River flood-resilience package (RIF $10.8m loan; ES $7.2m), May 2026.
- LINZ / PGF LiDAR post-contract outcome reporting on Environment Southland use of the regional LiDAR dataset.
- Earth Sciences NZ, Climate change impact across the Southland region, Volume 1 (prepared for Environment Southland; public copy dated 2026).

Classification: OPEN. This note summarises information released under LGOIMA and material already on the public record. It does not reproduce the underlying contracts. Totals may not capture all related spend if coding to the requested topics was incomplete. Prepared 28 August 2026.